



# INDEXA

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A non-profit organization for the enhancement of amateur radio,  
worldwide peace, and friendship

Daily Information Session — 14.236 MHz @ 23:30z

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## ***YI9PSE DXpedition to Kurdistan*** ***By Paul Ewing, N6PSE***

There are not many new countries on the global horizon. We now know the Netherland Antilles has created a few “new ones” as well as a few “deleted” ones. In Northern IRAQ, there is an unusual situation where there is a “country within a country”. This area is called Kurdistan. The word Kurdistan is Persian with a meaning of “the land of Kurds”.

Iraqi Kurdistan has gained official recognition internationally as an [autonomous](#) federal entity. There is a province by the name of [Kurdistan](#) in Iran, where Kurds are officially recognized as a minority. [Kurdish nationalism](#) seeks to unify the Kurdish areas into an independent [nation state](#).

Indeed, Iraqi Kurdistan has its own government called the KRG or Kurdistan Regional Government. They have their own President, their own Police and Military forces. Those Kurdish military forces have fought alongside Coalition forces and against the former Iraqi Army. This past history, and the fact that Kurds are non Arabs in an otherwise Arab region create a tension and desire for increasing autonomy.

In recognizing that Kurdistan is currently relatively safe and peaceful, but may not remain so when coalition forces pull out in 2011/2012, The YI9PSE team decided to mount an effort which would become the first DXpedition from Kurdistan, but would count as the DXCC entity of Iraq-YI. It was our hope that a successful visit to Kurdistan would lay the foundation for a possible return activation when and if Kurdistan becomes its own entity.

### **Obtaining the YI license:**

Ordinarily, getting an Iraqi Amateur Radio license is not a difficult undertaking. However in 2007 the Iraqi government feared that insurgents were using amateur radio to communicate, so they ceased issuing all licenses and halted all amateur radio activity for a period of time. As soon as that prohibition was lifted, I applied for my Iraqi Amateur call sign. After many months of waiting, I was contacted by the Iraqi Ministry of Communications and informed that my license could be picked up in Baghdad.

That posed a new problem. I had planned to travel directly to Kurdistan from Vienna and was not planning to come into lower IRAQ, particularly Baghdad. Eventually I was able to get the Ministry to send my license to

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me and I was able to avoid going directly to Baghdad to obtain the license.

### Finding an operating venue:

Now that the Iraqi amateur radio license was in hand, I needed to seek a hotel venue for the DXpedition and get permission from the local KRG Government to import our equipment. The criteria for our hotel were that it must have a backup generator in place. It must also allow us to set up our antennas on the building and grounds. The first hotel in Erbil that I contacted said "no antennas" would be allowed.

This may have been because this hotel was adjacent to the KRG headquarters in downtown Erbil. I later learned that antennas in Kurdistan are often a source of mistrust. Fortunately, the second hotel that we contacted, located in a rural area outside of town said they would welcome our antennas. This hotel proved to be an ideal venue for our DXpedition. Our hotel sat on a high plateau and was much higher than the surrounding terrain. The hotel had emergency diesel generators and comfortable accommodations, including a restaurant. It even had a helipad if needed.

### Visas and Customs:

Now that we had our Iraqi license and accommoda-

tions, we just needed to get approval to obtain visas and to import our equipment. Initially, the KRG said that only American and UK personnel could visit. After some discussion of what appeared to be an arbitrary rule, we were able to get the KRG to allow European and Japanese members of our team. We were told that we would receive ten day tourist visas issued to us upon arrival at the airport. Getting our equipment approved was a little more of a challenge. The Kurds do not understand the concept of amateur radio. There is a fear and distrust of technology and how it can be used. It took considerable explaining and negotiations to get our amateur radio equipment approved for import into Kurdistan. I would later learn that both American and Kurdish import/export laws do not permit an individual to export technology items to Kurdistan. Fortunately, I work for a Global Technology company that exports technology all over the world. I was very fortunate in that I was able to ship our items to Kurdistan through my company and use our established business relationships with logistics and freight forwarders to get our equipment to Kurdistan.

### Sponsors:

When building our DXpedition team, we were very fortunate to have many experienced members join our team. With them came relationships with sponsors such as ICOM, ACOM (K1LZ), DX Engineering and SteppIR. Our sponsors were very eager to see us achieve success in our effort to perform a DXpedition to Kurdistan. I had never led a DXpedition before, and I soon learned the value of these sponsors

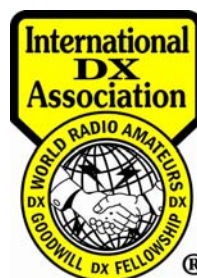
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The RTTY vertical can be seen on the left of the hotel. The verticals and Yagis on the right side of the hotel supported the CW operations. The SSB antennas are not seen in this photo.

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as without them we would have had to make many sacrifices and would not have been able to attain the level of success that we achieved. I've made a mental note to myself to support our amateur radio sponsors and increase my generosity towards future DXpeditions. Without everyone pitching in, they just cannot be done on a moderate to large scale.

### The Planning:

David Collingham-K3LP led our planning and documentation initiative. David is a very experienced, world-class DXpeditioner and Contester. David knew what would work and what would not. Right away, he suggested that we increase the number of planned active stations from three to five. David gave us the confidence that he could engineer the solutions required to operate close contact and achieve good performance. Bob Grimmick-N6OX led our antenna planning initiative. Bob arranged for a combination of SteppIR antennas as well as his own Force 12, C3S. David-K3LP also designed 1/4 wave verticals for 40/80/160 meters and 2 element 40 meter wire beam. Our plan was to place the 10-20 meter antennas in elevated positions on the hotel building and the 30-160 meter vertical antennas would be placed on the ground with large fields of ground radials below them. We sent Heathem-YI1UNH to do a site visit at the hotel four months before the actual DXpedition to assess the site and to add to our plans. We knew that we would need a lot of very good quality coax cable as we would have some significant run lengths to our antennas. In all, we brought 3000 ft of heavy Commscope 3227 (LMR 400 equivalent) and 2000 ft of RG8X coax cable to Kurdistan.

### The Team:

The final team was comprised of Bob Grimmick-N6OX, SSB. Bob was our antenna systems Team Leader. Jun Tanaka-JH4RHF, RTTY/CW/SSB, David Flack-AH6HY, SSB, Bill Beyer-N2WB, SSB. Bill was our SSB Team Leader. Heathem Sabah-YI1UNH, SSB. Heathem handled Public Relations and Translations for us. Al Hernandez-K3VN, SSB, David Collingham-K3LP, CW. David was our CW Team Leader. Jack Ritter-W0UCE, CW, Wayne Rogers-W5KDJ, CW, and Michel Brunelle-FM5CD, SSB and CW. Both Krassy Petkov-K1LZ, CW, and Hrane Milosevic-YT1AD joined the team on the last few days of the DXpedition. I could not have asked for a better, more enjoyable team of Operators.



The team gathered for their traditional photo showing that INDEXA had a presence in Iraq.

Each of these guys was just superb!

### Getting there:

Surprisingly, getting to Northern IRAQ is very easy from Europe. We were surprised to find that Austrian Airlines has almost daily flights from Vienna to Erbil. We then planned that team members would assemble and meet in Vienna and travel to Erbil on April 2<sup>nd</sup> with an advance team of Bob N6OX, Bill N2WB and Heathem-YI1UNH departing for Erbil on March 31<sup>st</sup>. The goal was for the advance team to obtain our equipment and to begin the set up process prior to the main team's arrival on April 2<sup>nd</sup>.

### Customs SNAFU:

It seems that many DXpeditions have a customs story to tell. We were no different. Despite our planning efforts well in advance of our visit, we were delayed in getting our equipment by four days and this cost us a day and a half of operating time. Our ten day DXpedition was reduced to eight and one half days.

I had made many detailed arrangements with the Minister of Interior. He was provided with each team member's name and passport information. They were given complete itemized lists of all of our equipment, including details such as serial numbers. After thorough review, all of our items were approved for import by the Minister of Interior. He assured us that there would be no problems in carrying out our plans.

I'll not soon forget the call from Bob N6OX from IRAQ as he said; "Bring a lot of money", as I was making my way to the airport to travel to Europe. Bob explained that our equipment was being held at

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the airport and that there was a customs issue. He was being asked to provide a significant cash bond to insure that we would not let our equipment stay behind or fall into the wrong hands. Despite our plans and assurances from the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Security was withholding our equipment from us. This was the first time we had even heard of a Ministry of Security.

The next day, the entire team arrived in Vienna and after brief introductions we made the 2 hour flight to Erbil. We met Bob, Bill and Heathem and relaxed in our hotel discussing what we needed to do the next morning when we would negotiate the release of our equipment.

The next morning, we made our way over to the warehouse where our equipment was being held. Iraqi customs had pried open all of our crates and had inventoried our equipment. We were immediately concerned as we saw only one of the five Icom radios was in our shipment. We asked about the other four radios and were dismayed to learn that they were still in Dubai! How are we going to have a successful DXpedition with only one radio!!!!!! We then went to the Ministry of Security office to discuss the hold on our equipment. We were very fortunate to have Heathem translate the discussions in Arabic into English for us. The Ministry of Security officials were very cordial and explained their concerns. They were not aware of our previous arrangements with the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Security asked us to give them a \$2000 USD cash bond to ensure that we would take all of our equipment back home. I agreed to give them the cash. We were then taken into the office to visit and have tea. I soon learned that all negotiations in Kurdistan seem to be done while having tea. Imagine my frustrations in having traveled 30 hours to get to IRAQ and to have tea before I can get our DXpedition equipment and get underway. I smiled and drank my tea.

### **Mr. Zerro steps in:**

As we were smiling and having our tea with the Ministry of Security officials, Heathem received a call from the General Manager of our Hotel, a Mr. Zerro Sherwani. We would soon learn who really seems to run Kurdistan. Mr. Zerro asked Heathem to let him speak to the Ministry of Security official. As Mr.

Zerro talked to the Ministry official, I could clearly see the demeanor in his face change to one of grave concern. A very loud and spirited conversation was taking place. After the call, the Ministry official then announced that we now had an option instead of paying the cash bond; we could now pay an "import tax". We asked Heathem how much is the tax? We were quite relieved when Heathem replied that the tax would be \$100 USD. I quickly handed Heathem the money, hoping that we could move this process along and get our equipment. But we had to finish our tea. We continued to smile and drink our tea when the Ministry official then announced that since we were "nice Americans" we could now have the discounted tax rate of \$54 USD! We paid him as fast as we could and finished our tea!

We raced back over to the warehouse where our gear was held and were quite relieved to be told that our remaining four radios were on an aircraft that had just flown in from Dubai and had landed. We waited for the shipment to be off loaded and there were our remaining radios!

We arranged for the shipper to deliver our equipment to the hotel in the next two hours. Bob, David, Heathem and I then went into downtown Erbil to visit the Bazaar and exchange some US currency for IRAQI Dinars. It was quite an experience to walk the streets of Erbil. We were amazed at the

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**Bob N6OX guides the largest crate of antennas to the ground.**

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friendly greetings and warmth gestures that we received from the IRAQI Kurds. They were very friendly and glad to have us visit their country. We returned to the hotel just in time to meet the shipper's delivery truck. We were very glad to see that the truck had a crane so that it could lift our crates and lower them to the ground.

### Setting up:

We decided to set up the CW and RTTY operations in rooms at the opposite ends of the hotel, on the second floor. This would minimize the coax runs and create some separation between the shacks. The SSB shack was set up in a restaurant out building across the large expanse of parking lot of the restaurant that shared the hilltop with our hotel. The SSB shack was about 1500 meters from the main hotel building. Bob's Force 12, C3S was the primary SSB antenna and was pointed at North America. The 2 element SteppIR Yagi was set up facing Europe and Japan as needed. Bob, Bill N2WB and Al K3VN set up an 80/160 vertical antenna and another 40/80 vertical antenna just outside the SSB shack. A 540' beverage was also added. Jun-JH4RHF set up the SteppIR BIG IR with 80 meter coil for RTTY at his end of the hotel.



**Al, K3VN, gives directions to W5KDJ, as N6OX, K3LP, N2WB and YI1UNK (facing the camera) do the heavy lifting to raise the three element SteppIR with 30/40 element to the hotel's roof.**

### Getting on the air:

Our first weekend of operation, we were in competition for band space with those involved in the SP-Polish Radio Contest. It was very difficult to find a clear frequency on which to listen. Fortunately the WARC bands were quiet and they found action right away. It was amazing how strong the signals from EU were into Northern IRAQ. Most of us were completely surprised by the desire/demand for YI9PSE contacts by the European amateur operators. We had planned to focus on North America and Asia but demand from EU was significant. European operators were most delighted to work us on 80/160 meters which may not have been done from YI to any degree in previous operations.

Schedule sheets were placed in each shack and we quickly fell into our rhythm. Some of our team members liked to operate all night, while others operated during the day. I particularly enjoyed operating at our sunrise and again at our sunset and that was the best path to the West Coast. I delighted in giving a "new one" to many of my W6 counterparts. We just don't hear Iraq at home!



**David, K3LP, in the CW Shack.**

We knew going to Iraqi Kurdistan that the power grid was unreliable. I don't think we were quite prepared for just how unreliable it was! We had frequent losses of commercial power, which occurred multiple times each day. Fortunately, the hotel's diesel generator started after 30-40 seconds and we were back

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on the air, albeit at low power until our AMPS could warm up again. I remember one morning in particular where we had perhaps five drops of power in rapid succession. Fortunately our logging laptops had their own batteries and we never lost power on the logging systems. I really have to give credit to ICOM and ACOM for their equipment's ability to drop power while we were transmitting and to have no damage whatsoever to any of their equipment.



**One of the hotel's large Diesel generators belches into life to keep power in the hotel. Backup power was deployed several times each day.**

We also experienced what we would consider extreme weather. While we experienced a little of the Arabian heat, the majority of our weather was very windy and cold. We had several days of thunderstorms with high winds and lightning. The high winds played havoc on our antenna systems, several of which spun in the wind or fell over while we were operating! I'll never forget that over in the SSB shack, we were working 17 meters to EU. One of the SSB team members came into the shack and asked which antenna we were operating on. We said that it was the two-element SteppIR. The team member laughed and told us that the two element SteppIR had fallen and was lying on the roof of the restaurant! We never noticed any degradation in performance while this antenna was lying on the roof! Fortunately, the antenna was undamaged and raised a few minutes later. One evening we experienced quite a storm. We had wind and sand pouring

into our SSB shack through the cracks in the wall panels. The hotel's maintenance manager came over to see us. He was concerned that our little SSB shack might blow off its stilts and tumble down the hill with us in it! We thanked him for his concern and we kept on operating. Fortunately, the little SSB shack stood steady!



**Dave AH6HY and Bill N2WB in the SSB "Shack".**

### **KRG visits our Operations:**

Early in the DXpedition, several representatives from the KRG met me at our hotel and viewed our operations. They were fascinated that with very simple equipment and antennas we were able to talk to people all over the globe. They paused and watched Bill N2WB operate in amazement as I told them each of the regions that Bill was working. They shared in our excitement as we worked through the pileup.



**KRG Representatives visit our SSB Shack.**

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### Where did the Propagation go?

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, a geomagnetic storm caused quite an impact to our propagation. Working North America became quite difficult, while we were still able to work EU stations with some ease. Fortunately, we enjoyed very good propagation on both our first weekend and our second and final weekend. On April 9<sup>th</sup>, a B-class solar flare and a Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) occurred which really impacted propagation just as we were about to cease our operation. We had considered adding extra days to our operation but once we became aware of the CME and the impact to our propagation, we decided against extra days of operations.

Our plan was to operate continuously through to the early evening of Sunday, April 11<sup>th</sup>, stopping only briefly to take some team pictures. We had planned to enjoy a team dinner upon our shut down and before we packed up our equipment to prepare for our flights to Vienna the next day. At that point, we were at 48,000 QSO's in our logs. The team decided to forgo the dinner and libations and instead they operated all night long, forgoing sleep and shutting down just a few hours before our gear was to be picked up and taken back to our shipper. The team really wanted to hit 50,000 QSOs and by golly, we made 50,401!

### The Kurds:

Several times during our DXpedition, members of the team went into Erbil to buy supplies or stretch their legs. Each time, we found the Kurds to be very friendly and warm towards us. They openly expressed interest in us and were very welcoming. They told us that they were thankful that we had visited their country. They were also thankful that the Coalition forces had saved them from Saddam Hussein.



Bob, N6OX, with a shopkeeper.



Several Kurd elders pose with David, K3LP.



The team visited Erbil's Grand Mosque.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, our visit to Kurdistan was very positive. We were safe at all times. Everyone was very friendly and gracious. The Kurds seemed to appreciate and welcome our visit. They took an interest in us and our activities. They were very accommodating to our every need. They have invited us to return and operate again. We hope to do that!

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I would like to thank INDEXA for supporting this DXpedition. It is only through the support of organizations such as INDEXA that a DXpedition such as this can be successful. I would also like to thank all of our equipment sponsors, including ICOM, ACOM (K1LZ specifically), SteppIR, DX Engineering, The DX Store and the RF Connection.

—73 Paul N6PSE

### DXpedition Statistics:

**Band/Mode breakdown**

Band	PH	CW	RTTY	Total
160	270	1713	0	1983
80	1605	2193	1	3799
40	4004	3690	260	7954
30		3256	891	4147
20	8244	8004	1079	17327
17	5478	2896	1015	9389
15	3007	2387	210	5604
12	143	15	1	159
10	12	27	0	39
<b>Totals</b>	<b>22763</b>	<b>24181</b>	<b>3457</b>	<b>50401</b>

**Breakdown by Continent**

Continent	Total
<b>Europe</b>	35773
<b>Asia</b>	6801
<b>North America</b>	6706
<b>South America</b>	515
<b>Africa</b>	396
<b>Oceania</b>	210
<b>Totals</b>	<b>50401</b>

**DXCC by Band/Mode breakdown**

Band	PH	CW	RTTY	Total
160	37	63	0	63
80	72	79	1	92
40	101	94	38	116
30		86	55	93
20	110	100	61	122
17	110	86	58	118
15	88	83	24	102
12	30	12	1	33
10	6	15	0	19
<b>Totals</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>165</b>

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